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An Account
OF THE
ELIZABETHAN STAGE SOCIETY,
BY
WILLIAM POEL,
Director.

June, 1898.

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North London Collegiate School for Girls,

SANDALL ROAD, CAMDEN ROAD, N.W.

3rd June, 1898.

Dear Mr. Poel,

I believe the work you are doing in connection with the Elizabethan Stage Society is very valuable as well as most interesting to students. Our pupils have, on several occasions, been present at your revivals of Shakespearian plays, and have found them most useful in helping them to realize the meaning of the dramatist. Our Cambridge Candidates have reason to be specially grateful for this help.

Believe me,

Yours sincerely,

SOPHIE BRYANT,

(Principal).

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THE

ELIZABETHAN STAGE SOCIETY.

16 Feb 56 1881

THIS Society is now completing its third season of revivals of sixteenth and seventeenth century plays. [Although the actual life of the Society began three years ago, it may be said to have had its origin in 1881, when a performance of the first quarto of *Hamlet* was given in St. George's Hall, London, in Elizabethan costumes and without scenery.] This first quarto had recently been made accessible to the world by a facsimile in photo-lithography, and notwithstanding the garbled passages, the great value of the first version towards a proper understanding of Shakespeare's masterpiece, was the immediate object of the representation. [The play was given under the auspices of the New Shakespeare Society, who afterwards reported in their transactions, "the seeing of the First Sketch actually played on the boards was necessary to enable any student to form a real judgment on its relation to the complete play, and was of the highest importance to that end." The play was acted continuously, and lasted two hours.] Here then, probably for the first time since Shakespeare's day, was reality given to Shakespeare's words, "the two hours traffic of our stage." But [what was of more vital importance to the future existence of the Society was the opinion, expressed by a large part of the audience, that there was nothing to be urged against the adopting of Elizabethan costume and the dispensing with scenery.]

The origin of the Society, a performance of *Hamlet* Quarto 1, in 1881.

[Since that performance, the principle advocated of representing Shakespeare's plays without scenery began to develop steadily among a few students. A Society formed in 1875 for reading aloud the plays of Shakespeare had many capable and intelligent readers among its members, and in 1887 it decided to enlarge the scope of its labours.] *The Merchant of Venice* was given as a first Annual Reading in the Botanical Theatre of University College. This was followed by *Romeo and Juliet*,

Public Readings by the Shakespeare Reading Society.

Gen. Rec. Baldwin 15 n 55 #12044

Twelfth Night, *Much Ado*, *Henry V.*, *Richard II.*, and *Julius Cæsar*, given at the London Institution and at Steinway Hall.

The preparation for each Annual Reading extended over three months, with sometimes as many as three or four rehearsals in the week. Ladies and gentlemen, in modern costume, recited Shakespeare, from a platform of draped curtains, with but little loss of dramatic effect, for the interest of the audience was sustained by giving prominence to the story of the play, together with careful characterization and intelligent delivery of the text, while frequent rehearsals enabled the readers to acquire ease and uniformity in the management of the blank

A Criticism of them. Of one of these Annual Readings a leading dramatic critic said, in a morning paper : " From these simple recitals without acts, waits or scenery, and therefore without those departures from the conditions contemplated by the poet, which are inevitable in a modern theatre, I learn a good deal about the plays which I can learn in no other way." }

In 1891 it was decided to make a more ambitious venture with *Measure for Measure*, given in costume but without scenery, at Ladbroke Hall, Notting Hill. In 1892 the Society gave a recital of the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* in the St. James's Banqueting Hall, and repeated it in costume before the members of the Albany Club at Kingston. In the autumn of that year, at the instigation of the same body of Readers, and with the aid of the Independent Theatre Society, Webster's

The Duchess of Malfi by the Independent Theatre.

tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi* was revived at the Opera Comique Theatre with a professional cast. Of this performance the "Athenæum" said : " In bringing practically for the first time, before the public of this generation, a piece of this class, the Independent Theatre is rendering a genuine and an uncontested service." *Love's Labour's Lost* was the Annual Reading of 1893, given in the spring of the year, and in the following autumn, with the assistance of Mr. Arthur Dillon, who was a member of Committee of the Shakespeare Reading Society, there was carried out a long cherished scheme of building a stage after the Elizabethan model, and the Royalty Theatre, in Soho, was converted into as near a resemblance of the old Fortune Playhouse as a roofed theatre would adm

of. *Measure for Measure* was the play chosen, which was acted by the students who recited it at Ladbroke Hall in 1891, and the audience immediately adjoining the stage wore Elizabethan costume.] Of this performance the "Times" said: "The experiment proved at least that scenic accessories are by no means as indispensable to the enjoyment of a play as the manager supposes," and a professor of literature at one of our London colleges wrote: "I don't think I was ever more interested—nay, fascinated—by a play upon the stage, and now I shall ever think the cutting up into scenes and acts a useless cruelty, and an utter spoiling of the story."

Measure for Measure on a Model Stage of the Old Fortune Play-house.

It was after this last performance that Mr. Dillon decided to found a Society that might become a permanent audience, whose subscriptions would enable two or more plays to be given annually after the manner of the recent revival. The idea was warmly supported by Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Gosse. Sir Walter Besant, Rev. Stopford A. Brooke, Walter Crane, Esq., Israel Gollancz, Esq., Prof. Hales, Sidney Lee, Esq., "Maarten Maartens," Hamo Thornycroft, Esq., R.A., Mrs. Thackeray Ritchie, Miss Swanwick, and the Hon. Mrs. Lionel Tollemache, were numbered among the first subscribers. The services of Mr. Arnold Dolmetsch with his old instruments were secured for the music, and Captain Hutton, F.S.A. kindly volunteered his advice upon the sword-play, while Miss Jennie Moore gave her valuable help in designing the Elizabethan costumes. The plays given in 1895-96 were *Twelfth Night* and the *Comedy of Errors*, which were acted in the dining-hall of Gray's Inn, and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* acted in St. George's Hall; for this last Mr. Swinburne kindly wrote a prologue. In the second season 1896-97 was acted the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* in the Merchant Taylors' Hall* and repeated at the Charterhouse, and *Twelfth Night* at the Middle Temple Hall on which occasion the Prince of Wales as a Bencher of the Inn was present. A portion of *Arden of Feversham* together with an episode in the play of *Edward III.* were

The Society founded; its supporters.

* It was after this last performance that an article on the Society's Revivals appeared in LA NOUVELLE REVUE entitled *Shakespeare sans décors.*

revived at St. George's Hall in July of last year and brought the second season to a close. The performances during the current season have been *The Tempest* revived at the Mansion House and repeated at the Goldsmiths' Hall, Beaumont and Fletcher's Comedy *The Coxcomb* given at the Inner Temple, and Middleton and Rowley's Comedy *The Spanish Gipsy* acted at St. George's Hall, for which last Mr. Swinburne again wrote a prologue. Nor must it be forgotten how invaluable has been the help of Mr. Dolmetsch's music in giving completeness to the Revivals of *The Tempest* and *The Spanish Gipsy*. John Ford's tragedy *The Broken Heart* will be revived on the 11th of this month at St. George's Hall, and Ben Jonson's pastoral *The Sad Shepherd*, a fragment, will be acted, for the first time, in the garden of Fulham Palace, by invitation of the Right Rev. The Bishop of London.

Some Press criticisms on the Society's Revivals.

Since the Elizabethan Stage Society has come into existence its performances have been often reported in the newspapers, and special acknowledgment is due to the Press for the publicity given to the Society's Revivals. It may be necessary, however, to comment shortly on one or two of the criticisms.

Electric light for the stage.

It has been asserted that our performances have not been archæologically consistent, that we have used footlights of the electric light, and that the women's parts have not been played by boys. With regard to the lighting of our stage, it must be remembered that the Elizabethan playhouse was open to the sky, and that the performance began at three o'clock. On winter afternoons, when the play was acted in the palace or in the private theatre, candles were used as footlights, or torches were held by servants. In the Society's Revivals, the object has been to give a diffused and subdued light, somewhat equivalent to the candle power light of the olden time, and thus to avoid that glare and distortion of feature that comes from the modern method of illumination. Whether this be done by candle or electric light is not much to the moment, if the visible effect is the same. So also in regard to the acting of the women's parts by boys. The boy who in Shakespeare's time acted Desdemona wore the farthin-

Boys in women's parts.

gale ; in appearance he was a girl. His voice was like the "maiden's organ shrill and sound" and all was "semblative a woman's part."* That the boys were successful in the delineation of female characters we learn from the Puritan, Stephen Gosson, who complained that these youths put on "not only the apparel, but the gait, gestures, voices, passions of woman," and Ben Jonson has left on record that one of these boys could dress better than forty women, and could pass himself off unrecognised at a supper party as a lawyer's wife. However this may be, the fact remains that boy-actors are no longer available for our stage because neither the schoolmaster nor the choirmaster will give the necessary permission.

The stage "business," as it is called, is naturally open to criticism in the present revivals. A modern Shakespearian representation can hardly have anything Elizabethan about it. The limitations of the Elizabethan stage. Few stage movements now in vogue would be possible on a platform limited to two entrances situated at the back of the stage, while gallants, seated on stools, almost surrounded the actors. "Had we persisted in retaining all the original conditions, our representations could have been little more than costume recitals. In fact, Elizabethan acting must have begun with the dialogue and ended with the dialogue, since there was nothing of moment to the spectator but the story of the play, which it was the duty of the dramatist to make complete in every way by means of the dialogue. Were Burbage alive to-day he would be not a little surprised to see the amount of attention paid by the modern actor to stage "business" to the neglect of the elocution that should give point to the dialogue.

"I'll change my voice into a thousand tones

The elocution.

To chain attention :"

says Pretiosa in *The Spanish Gipsy*. This was the secret of the actor's power in the sixteenth century.

Passing on to notice the criticisms upon the Society's choice of plays, exception has been taken to Beaumont and

* *Twelfth Night*, Act i. Scene 4.

The Coxcomb. Fletcher's comedy *The Coxcomb* on account of the queer casuistry of the main plot. But the underplot of the play, which forms by far the larger portion of it, is pure besides being interesting and poetical. Dr. Ward has pointed out, that the story of the girl's pathetic pilgrimage is contrived with much dramatic skill, while the heroine is drawn with no less beauty and delicacy than Shakespeare's own Viola. The dramatist shews us the rude awakening of a young girl's mind to the selfishness of men, who make solemn promises of affection one moment and forget them over their cups the next, who marry rich old women and tempt the virtue of young ones. These scenes, which are delineated with a firm touch of unerring sincerity, with a poet's eye and a philosopher's conviction, bear, we can scarcely doubt, the stamp of Beaumont's genius. From the prologue written after his death, we may gather he was justly proud of his share in this comedy, and it was considered worthy of revival in the Hall of the Inn, of which he had been a member.* It was, therefore, a disappointment to those responsible for the choice of this play to find that what had been suppressed in the representation was dragged before the public in the papers, while the poetical scenes were passed over in silence; one journal going so far as to say, that the sentiment of the Viola episode was "mawkish." If so, then virtue itself is mawkish, and the taste of the day on the London stage has become similar to that of the Restoration period, when our comic dramatists were guilty of a systematic attempt to disparage purity in men and women. It was not thus that Burbage viewed the dramatist's calling, when in the words of Webster he said: "Shall we protest to the ladies that their painting makes them angels? or to my young gallant that his expense in the brothel shall gain him reputation? No, Sir; such vices as stand not accountable to law should be cured as men heal tetters, by casting ink upon them."† Not that unpleasant subjects, however moral in their aim, should form the staple food of the playgoer. But a theatre at its best must be comprehensive and deal with all phases of life. *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, are the

* The Inner Temple.

† Induction to the *Malcontent*.

work of the same master poet who wrote *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*.

It was often found, in these revivals of old plays, not merely that omissions were necessary, but also some re-construction of the play. The Elizabethan dramatists, with the exception of Shakespeare, were bad constructors of plots. They could conceive fine dramatic situations and write powerful scenes, but there is often no method, no sequence, no directness of purpose in the arrangement of the scenes, so that, interest aroused in one scene is often dissipated in the next. This was no great fault in times when the spectators were accustomed to representations of *Miracles*, *Moralities*, and *Histories* devoid of sequel in the narrative. But the effect of such drama upon a modern audience is wearying and disappointing, nor can actors be found of sufficient ability to sustain the spectator's attention in scenes that have no connection with the main issue. But where re-arrangement of scenes is necessary, the utmost precaution must be taken.] “To read a play,” says Robert Louis Stevenson, “is a knack, the fruit of much knowledge and some imagination, comparable to that of reading score ;” the reader is apt to miss the proper point of view. [To guard against a mishap of this kind, it has always been a rule of the Society to rehearse the whole play as it was originally written, and only when the author's point of view is realised to make such omissions and revisions as are absolutely essential. To give more perfect form to a play is to increase its vitality ; and every work the Society revives is given in the hope of its becoming part of a repertory for future use.]

Elizabethan
Dramatists
bad constructors
of Plots.

In order to ensure a good cast for the Society's Revivals all restrictions are removed as to the choice of performers. Professional help, when volunteered, is gratefully accepted, but is seldom available ; or the actors may belong to any Amateur Club or Society ; no fee is demanded, and whenever possible, the out of pocket expenses are paid. If the actors are beginners they get free instruction in elocution to prepare the voice for the platform. In return, it is expected that the

The Actors in
Revivals ; no
restriction as
to their choice.

actor shall uphold the principle of loyalty to the author, in so far that no part shall be acted in any way detrimental to the other parts, and that each actor shall feel individually responsible for keeping the proper balance of the play. This was undoubtedly the spirit in which plays were acted in Shakespeare's time. [It was necessary for the actor's responsibilities to reach beyond his own part, since even those who took prominent parts used the cloak and beard to impersonate other characters in the same play. The disguise must have been very superficial; but here again the imagination of the audience supplied the deficiency. It has been the work of some years to accustom a body of amateurs to think more of a play than of their parts in it, but the task has been facilitated by the nature of the work. Most of the plays revived by the Society have never been seen by the present generation. [There have been no actor's traditions to discuss. It was only from a careful study of the play itself that any idea of its interpretation could be formed. A difficult situation would be talked over generally to ensure that action being used which was best for the play, not that which was most convenient for any particular actor. By encouraging an equal share in responsibility it has become possible to get an even performance.]

Shakespearian
Revivals
repeated to
Students of the
High Schools.

Although the Society has so far revived only nine plays, five of which have been Shakespeare's, it has given in all twenty-seven representations. *Twelfth Night*, the *Comedy of Errors*, and *The Tempest* were repeated at St. George's Hall to students of the High Schools, who assembled there to the number of six or seven hundred, when the play was one they had prepared for the Cambridge Local Examination. Text-books are not sufficient for the study of Shakespeare. Much that is obscure in the dialogue becomes intelligible when action is added. At the revival of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the appearance of Lucifer with the seven Deadly Sins proved the most impressive episode in the play, while on the printed page its significance was never apparent. And it was the same in *The Spanish Gipsy*, notably in the play scene, in which Clara becomes the central figure of interest, although there is not a single allusion in

the scene to indicate that she is even on the stage. Students have therefore a practical advantage in seeing Shakespeare's plays given without mutilation. But unfortunately the price of admission that is adequate to the means of a school girl does not cover the cost of representation. Not remunerative.

In this country there is a popular belief that everything connected with the playhouse should be self-supporting, an opinion that is not shared by Mr. Ruskin, nor perhaps upheld by any other country except our own, unless it be America. If the Stage is capable, as Bacon says, "of no small influence both of discipline and corruption,"* then those who have at heart the highest welfare of their country, must wish to see the drama have a tendency that is educational and ethical. But in the opinion of Mr. Frederic Harrison "An intellectual theatre can never be maintained by the money taken at the doors, till the culture and habits of our people are entirely transformed. And the only way in which it can be maintained is by the munificence of some citizen of great wealth, high culture, and ardent public spirit."† The talented author of John Inglesant, writing some years ago to the "Pall Mall Gazette," said, "If you ask to what I attribute the decadence of the English stage, I answer:--- *Vast theatres and mechanical apparatus.* I have sometimes thought that could there be maintained in London a *very small* theatre in which all the 'pit seats are stalls,' and there was no gallery or a very small high-price one, and in which no mechanical apparatus was allowed excepting scene-shifting—and that very seldom and occasional—that such a theatre might become the school for a class of English actors who would recall the past, and might perchance attract the highest genius to write for the stage." On these lines, to a great extent, the work of the Elizabethan Stage Society is carried out, and without assuming that it has accomplished, in an histrionic way, more than the level of honest endeavour, yet at least it has revived upon the stage plays of literary merit which could not have been seen under any other circumstances. But there is much good work remaining to be done. Popular opinion that the drama should be self-supporting
Frederic Harrison on the Drama.
Opinion of Mr. Henry Shorthouse.
Much good work yet to be done.

* *De Augmentis*, book 11, chapter xiii.

† The "Forum," October, 1893.

at present been revived after the manner of his own time, while none of Ben Jonson's comedies have yet been attempted, Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* and the latter dramatist's comedy *The Loyal Subject*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, are plays that our commentators pronounce to have exceptional literary and dramatic qualities. And, while keeping alive past models and traditions of excellence, the Society might also endeavour to keep the past in touch with the present by the representation of some modern English play of acknowledged merit.

The Balance
Sheet.

With regard to the finances, the Society may, I think, be shown to have done its work economically. There have been, including the initiatory performance of *Measure for Measure* at the Royalty Theatre in 1893, nine plays revived of which five were Shakespeare's, making with the repetitions twenty-seven representations ; and the total receipts have amounted to £1,500, while the expenditure has exceeded this amount by £1,100. But all of this is not actual loss, as we retain property in the shape of costumes, valued at half that amount, and probably worth more ; since each costume is historically accurate. Then there was a loss of £300 over the six performances of *Measure for Measure*, so that the actual loss during the remaining twenty-one performances is less than £300. The Society is most anxious to continue its labours for a fourth season, and to do so must have at its disposal funds to meet the inevitable deficiency. To raise the rate of subscription to the members would not be prudent as it is already higher than many of our literary supporters can afford to pay. If a sum of £300 can be raised it will be placed in the hands of the Treasurer, who will account to the donors for the way in which it is used.

£300 needed
as a reserve
fund against
future losses.

WILLIAM POEL.

Treasurer—CECIL F. J. JENNINGS, ESQ.,
27, Walbrook, E.C.

Secretary—MISS BROWN,
32, Melrose Gardens, Hammersmith, W.

